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ABSTRACT

Information about commuting students in higher education is enigmatic. This literature review indicates that while estimates of the numbers of commuting students swell, real growth seems to be occuring primarily in the number of students who live off campus, not those living with parents. Expected costs saving is the prime reason that most commuters give for commuting; yet, the true difference in costs between commuters and residents for attendance at the same type of institution is not large. Psychological differences between commuters and residents often have been asserted but seldom established, although different background characteristics have been shown statistically. For commuters, the expereince of college differs from that of the resident student. The pressures of time from commuting and working (typically) encourage less measured change in nonintellectual attributes. (Author/MJM)

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THE COMMUTING STUDENT
by David A. Trivett

The number of American students who do or could commute to college is a reason to revise one's notion of what it means to "go" to college. The commuter's college experiences and benefits may significantly differ from those of his classmates who live in dormitories. And they may also differ from the resident student at the start. Research is now being directed toward commuters in an effort to assess their characteristic collegiate experiences and, if necessary, to design special programs for them.

HOW MANY COMMUTERS?

The number of students who should be considered commuters is hard to determine. Some indication is available from survey data. For example, in the fall of 1973, 189,733 freshmen enrolled at 360 representative institutions were surveyed. With their responses weighted to equalize the respective rates of attendance at different types of colleges, some 28 percent lived within 10 miles and over half lived within 50 miles of the college they attended. These figures are biased by the responses of students who attend public two-year colleges (where over half live within 10 miles and 85 percent are within 50 miles), but looking at the responses of freshmen at all four-year institutions, close to 16 percent live within 10 miles and another 20 percent within 50 miles. Thus, a substantial number of students might reasonably be commuters. In fact, 42 percent of freshmen for all institutions did report that they resided with their parents or relatives and close to 24 percent of four-year college freshmen also live with their parents or relatives (Astin 1974, pp. 39, 44).

A perspective on where freshmen plan to live comes from data reporting choice of housing drawn from a sample of 542,015 student records in the American College Testing Assessment Program for 1967-68, 1969-70, and 1971-72. Comparing 1970 and 1972 with 1968, several patterns are apparent. Fewer men in public and private institutions (two-year, four-year, master's and doctoral granting) are planning to live at home and commute to college. Except for students in four-year colleges and private master's granting colleges, women, in increasing numbers, are also planning not to live at home. Particularly evident is a change toward off-campus (but not with parents) living for women at all types of institutions. More men are also planning to live off-campus. Women are not planning to live on-campus as much as they were; however, in numerous instances more men in 1970 and 1972 are planning to live on campus than did so in 1968. Care in interpretation is necessary; nevertheless, there is *not* (to 1972) an evident increase in percentage of students choosing to commute if by that we mean to live at home with parents. However, the numbers of students planning on off-campus living—another type of commuting—have increased (based on data in Fenske and Scott 1973, pp. 24-29, 67-68).

Hardwick and Kazlo estimated that 75 percent of all college students are presently commuting (1974) and they report expectations of a 90 percent commuting rate by 1985 (Hardwick and Kazlo 1974, n.p.n.). Although they doubt many administrators are aware of the need, they argue that it is important to discover how to develop and deliver needed services to commuters.

COMMUTERS AND COSTS

Granted that the potential and actual number of commuters is high, why do students choose to commute rather than to leave home for college? Jencks and Riesman (1969) pictured *commuter colleges* as being "safe" for those students who wanted to progress rapidly into adult roles. They assert that low cost is the prime attraction of the commuter colleges for their clientele (pp. 51, 110, 183).

The importance of money in the college-choice decision for commuters can be seen in another survey reported by Fenske and Scott. Based on samples of 32,531 students from 796 different colleges in 39 states for fall 1966 and

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David Trivett is a research associate at the ERIC Clearinghouse on Higher Education.

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50,205 students from 1,103 colleges in 45 states in fall 1969 (drawn from much larger populations of students participating in the ACT Assessment program), they found that a high percentage of commuters (derived from the category "local attenders") attached major importance to low cost in their college selection. Local attenders were also far more likely to expect to work while in college. These considerations of cost and employment might be explained by the under representation of local attenders in the upper family income categories but proportionate representation in the lower family income groups (Fenske and Scott, pp. 4, 13, 16, 18, 20).

Yet, studies of budget estimates for aid applicants have shown that the total estimated per student cost for commuters and residents at all types of institutions differs only by about $300 per year. For example, if tuition and fees are equal, total estimated costs for resident students at public four-year institutions are $2,400. However, total estimated costs for commuter students at public four-year institutions are $2,085. For four-year private institutions, resident cost estimates total $4,039; commuter estimates are $3,683. High transportation costs may offset the commuters' saving on room and board (Suchar, Van Dusen, and Jacobson, pp. v, vii). If the attraction of apparent lower costs has encouraged students to attend college, these budget estimates portend heightened barriers to college. On the other hand, fewer students might choose to commute if they see little difference in cost.

ARE COMMUTERS DIFFERENT?

One stream of research on commuters has sought psychological reasons for the choice to commute. Kysar believes that the commuter delays the normal development task of leaving home and may rationalize his delay by unwarranted reference to lower expenses. In Kysar's clinical work among commuters (Chicago Circle, University of Illinois), he found feelings of inadequacy in the social-sexual sphere, self-doubt, fear of failure, and a reluctance to commit energy and resources into the college experience. Parents of commuters, fearful that their offspring would reject family values, compromise through the use of a commuter college. Kysar's observation led to the hypothesis that the existence of a high proportion of students with individual pathology, e.g., from broken homes or from lower socioeconomic status families, "results in a higher rate and more severe psychopathology in the student population of a commuter school as compared with most residential schools" (p. 3). In contrast with the experience of the resident student, the commuter does not receive reassurance from a peer group as he works through an identity crisis. For the commuter, many crucial decisions may simply be avoided in the face of hostile, belittling parental attitudes. Kysar suggests that the need for mental health counseling is even greater for commuter students than for resident students (Kysar, pp. 1-10). In one attempt to evaluate Kysar's hypothesis, female commuters (but not male) were found to have lower scores than resident students on the "Self," "Parents," and "Total" scales of the Bown Self Report Inventory (Bown and Richek, pp. 356-358).

Schuchman posits five categories of commuter students. The first and largest consists of the first generation college attenders who seek to improve their social or economic status and whose parents may continue to demand that they act the same around the house. This group may not have privacy or emotional and financial support from their parents. The second group is immature and unable to leave home for a variety of emotional reasons. A third group loves the action of an urban campus. Another group, the reluctant investors, have financial or academic problems that prevent their attendance at a residential school. The fifth group, one growing in number, is those who travel from a distance to attend a commuter institution. Schuchman argues that all commuters face "challenges to growth" such as "learning to deal with authority" that may be severe because they commute. Special counseling is needed to encourage commuters to be open to their new experiences (Schuchman, pp. 466-470).

Comparing small numbers of resident hall groups with commuters, Stark found commuters to have a greater number of problems in finances, living conditions, employment, and home and family (Stark, pp. 277-281). However, George (1970) was unable to establish a correlation between any of the scales of the Edwards Personal Preference Schedule and commuting or resident status. Only socioeconomic status, namely, whether or not the father's occupation was professional managerial, had predictive value (1966) (pp. 1-5).

Dressel and Nisula (1966) provide other evidence that the socioeconomic difference is crucial. In their comparative study, they found that most commuters chose their schools because of proximity and low cost whereas residents chose because of particular programs and scholarships. In general, they found that parents of resident students earned more than did commuter parents. Commuting students were also more likely to be working and working longer hours (pp. 14, 15-19, 25).

Based on their massive sampling, Fenske and Scott summarized the statistical differences by saying that students who attended local colleges in 1966 and 1969 were more likely than migrators to have low high school grades, low ACT composite scores, low educational expectations, urban backgrounds, and low or lower-middle family income. They expected to work more than half-time, stated that low cost was a major consideration, and participated in less than the average number of high school extracurricular activities. Fenske and Scott were disturbed by the implication that American college going could be two different streams: resident college for the rich and commuter school for the poor (Fenske and Scott, pp. 22-23).

THE COLLEGE EXPERIENCE FOR COMMUTERS

The experience of college, the process itself, also differs for commuters and resident students. Ward and Kurz have characterized the commuter's life as "the divided life." The divided life can be seen in the schedule, the environment and the facilities. One of the most critical aspects of schedule for many commuters arises from the job. They found that the typical commuter at Wayne State spent six hours a day working or commuting. Academic scheduling is influenced by the job, so the work and commuting schedule may dictate which courses are taken and when. Because of work, extra activities, such as field trips, are difficult to accommodate. Ward and Kurz also view the commuter's psychological environment as less desirable, with little sup-

port from home for new political and social ideas. The resident student draws his friends from the academic setting, the commuter draws his from family and neighborhood. Schedule and environment also interact to keep the commuter from developing friendships with faculty (Ward and Kurz, pp. 1-12).

Dressel and Nisula found commuters more likely to list as their closest or more frequent companions their friends from high school, many of whom were not enrolled in college with them. Although commuters reported they had private study facilities, they used the library facilities on campus more days per week and for longer periods of time than did residents. However, the hectic commuter schedule forced them to study anywhere they could find time and place (Dressel and Nisula, pp. 6-33; also see Gocek 1970).

THE IMPACT OF COLLEGE ON COMMUTERS

In view of the possible differences between residents and commuters when they begin college, and differences in the nature of the experience itself, differences in outcomes for commuters and residents should be expected. Chickering and Kuper, basing their observations on students in the Project on Student Development study of thirteen liberal arts colleges and on data from American Council on Education Office of Research studies, found "sharp differences" in extracurricular activities and peer relations between commuters and residents. Commuters participated less frequently and in a narrower range of activities and had a smaller set of friends and more formal relationships with the opposite sex. While resident students showed greater changes in the "nonintellective" areas of behavior, commuters showed greater increases on measures of intellectual interest. Chickering and Kuper suggest that resident students probably change rapidly in the first two years of their college life, particularly in nonintellectual areas where they see sharp contrast with home life. Commuters make a slower, restrained change except for cognitive development, which occurs at a rate similar to that of resident students (Chickering and Kuper, pp. 258-261).

Using data from the ACE Cooperative Institutional Research Program, Alexander Astin performed regression analyses on a sample of 5,091 student records of freshmen in fall 1966 (resurveyed in summer and fall 1970) to identify significant aspects of college residence location. The results are generally favorable to dormitory living in comparison to living with parents. "Dormitory residents were less likely to drop out and more likely than commuters to attain the baccalaureate in four years, to apply for admission to graduate school, and to earn a high grade point average" (Astin 1973, pp. 206-207). In addition, he found that dormitory living had a more positive effect on social behaviors (such as dating, drinking, listening to music) and on a student's perception of his own interpersonal competence. The advantage of dormitory living for degree completion rate is heavily dependent on the type of institution the student enrolled in as a freshman. The greatest positive influence was seen for the student in a four-year college and a slight negative effect for the two-year college student (Astin 1973, pp. 206-210).

How commuters feel about their experience has also been explored. Using the College Student Questionnaire at North Texas State University, Hardy and Williamson studied the differences between 112 commuter and 133 resident students. Commuter students tended to be more satisfied with the college administration than were the resident students (Hardy and Williamson, p. 47). On the basis of comments accompanying surveys, Dressel and Nisula found commuters reporting a loss of self-identity and lack of adequate social life (p. 38). Nevertheless, they concluded that the apparent detachment of commuters from campus life may be due to their preference or nature rather than lack of attention from the institution. "Whether of necessity or choice, many commuters fit college in with their work and with their family and community life; residents tend to make college their whole life" (Dressel and Nisula, pp. 45-46).

DOING SOMETHING FOR COMMUTERS

Several efforts are under way to ascertain if commuters are different and to propose facilities and programs for obvious special needs.

One special program is the Office of Commuting Student Affairs at the University of Maryland, College Park. This office has responsibilities such as identifying the problems faced by commuters, devising ways commuters can take advantage of educational opportunities, and identifying issues where the campus or university should lobby because of special impact on commuters. Typical improvements would be sought in parking, transportation, food, security, lounge space, and communication and orientation, for example (Hardwick and Kazlo 1973, pp. 1-7). In addition, the office operates the National Clearinghouse for Commuter Programs because so little knowledge is available about programs that deal specifically with commuting students. Attempts have been made to survey the awareness of commuter student problems nationally. Results suggest that universitities are not aware of the number of commuters, their travel arrangements, or special services that might be necessary for commuters (Hardwick and Kazlo 1974, n.p.n.). The National Clearinghouse has published bibliographies on commuter students (Kazlo and Hardwick) and is publishing a newsletter, *The Commuter*.

At the University of Alberta, Edmonton, commuting students have been under scrutiny in a series of studies. The university became aware that the growth of the city and a doubling of enrollment resulted in disproportionate growth in the number of commuting students. Based on questionnaires and direct observation, studies have been completed on transportation patterns of commuters (Williamson 1971), study facilities (Brunt and Williamson), lounge space (Williamson 1972a), food facilities (Williamson, Brunt and Zaharia 1972), and recreation space (Williamson 1972b).

At Wayne State University, specific changes were suggested in the facilities available to commuters to counter the effect of "the divided life." Ward and Kurz suggest that widely dispersed study facilities with quiet and good lighting are needed as are specially designed eating and socializing places that will promote social and intellectual interchange. In addition, they propose that shops and studios be available when commuters need them, that overnight facilities be provided for occasional use, and that mailboxes be used to enable better communication with commuters. Large scale suggestions include "outpost centers" or suburban meeting areas for commuters that would have study and social facilities (Ward and Kurz, pp. 1-15; see also Stoner, Anderson and Gaskie).

CONCLUSION

Information about commuting students in higher education is enigmatic. While estimates of the numbers of commuting students swell, real growth seems to be occurring primarily in the number of students who live off campus, not those living with parents. Expected cost saving is the prime reason that most commuters give for commuting; yet, the true difference in costs between commuters and residents for attendance at the same type of institution is not large. Psychological differences between commuters and residents often have been asserted but seldom established, although different background characteristics have been shown statistically. For commuters, the experience of college differs from that of the resident student. The pressures of time from commuting and working (typically) encourage less measured change in nonintellectual attributes. Fortunately, steps in solving the problems are being made through studies of commuters and efforts such as the National Clearinghouse for Commuter Programs.

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